(78)

CHAPTER TEN

000 ONE living force had continued at the old house, however, from the time it was built right to the present day. This was my mother's elder sister, our Kyi-Kyi Lon, the same who had thrown herself on the ground at first beholding the muddy fields of Thaton. She had never been to an English school like my mother and indeed had known no other home but the old house all her life. My Kyi-Kyi (aunt-elder-than-parent) is unmarried. The story of how she remained unmarried is stamped with her character.

• 587 589 My eldest aunt was married and died after bearing three children, and the bereaved husband came back to Grandfather and asked for the hand of another aunt so that the children should not lack a loving mother's care. This aunt also died, and the hardy widower again returned to Grandfather. Grandfather might have been persuaded to give another daughter in marriage but Kyi-Kyi Lon, who was next on the list, stamped her feet and shooed the widower away, regardless of the belief that a man who survives two wives is outlived by his third. She inherited my grandfather's spirit and vitriolic temper, and a very lively tongue. When she was young she was round and sturdy and was therefore called Ma Lon, Miss Round. With years of spinsterhood, roundness disappeared, the sturdiness developed into a masculine toughness and her natural abilities turned to business management; her feet broadened and she could tramp for miles; with her sharp tongue she could make men quail. It was our Kyi-Kyi who looked after our rubber estates for us. My mother stood in awe of her, and it was a beautiful lesson in gentle humanity to watch the sisters together. My mother had two aspects to her nature. She had an all-round ability equal to Kyi-Kyi Lon's, but there was a gentleness which tempered every masculine ability she possessed. This tempering was always imposed above. In my aunt's presence, the lower stratum automatically disappeared, because Kyi-Kyi, who quarrelled with everyone else, loved my mother like a child who must be scolded and looked after. She therefore devoted her life to our interests.

186 196 My aunt never learnt English, and derided the refined tones of English pronunciation. She never made the slightest concession to any foreign tongue. Surrounded by a world in which products and institutions bore English names, she took delight in pronouncing unavoidable terms with the broadest Burmese accent. "Ine-Si-Et", she would

14: Brant E-5 (1949-50) 1954 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

thinking, being the mother of a son is itself considered the greatest event of a woman's life and represents the achievement of full existence as a female human being. The relationship is close and indulgent. The mother is regarded by her son as more important than his wife; in fact, a son normally will choose a wife with a great deal of regard for his mother's opinions and wishes. 513

Mother and Daughter. The mother is her daughter's early teacher. It is considered most important for the girl to learn prayers, how to prepare the daily food offering, and how to change the flowers on the household altar. These things are taught almost from the time the child begins to speak and understand. Other household duties in which a mother instructs her daughter vary considerably with the economic status of the family. In poor families some assistance with tending animals and winnowing the rice is part of the girl's work from about the age of ten. Daughters are expected to show filial respect and deference equally to the mother and father. 513 868 [565]

Father and Son. The father occupies the role of disciplinarian in the family. Disciplining of sons may include physical punishment, though such measures are not resorted to readily. Prior to adolescence, boys are taught prayers and good habits by their mothers, with the father remaining more or less in the background and interfering only when disciplinary action may be required of him. After a son passes adolescence the father becomes important as his mentor. 593 861

Husband and Wife's Elder Sister. This relationship tends to mirror a conflict between age and sex as status factors in the social structure. There is an implicit conflict between the husband's position as a man and his wife's elder sister's position, in many cases, as his senior, having a claim on outward respect and obedience. In practice this relationship is often cool and aloof in nature, very much in contrast to the free and easy one between a man and his wife's younger sisters. 607 182 602

Husband and Wife's Younger Sister. A man is expected to show great favor to his wife's younger sisters and to display more interest in them than in his own sisters. He buys them presents, gives them spending money when he can, and covertly he is expected to be on the lookout for prospective husbands for them. Quite frequently, the wife's younger sisters will accompany her and her husband when she marries, and all will live together in the same house. Although husband and wife's younger sisters engage in a great deal of mutual joking and teasing, the relationship does not normally assume a sexual aspect. Polygyny is permissable but very rarely practiced; when it is, however, it takes the sororal form. The rather free and easy relationship between a husband and his wife's younger sisters sometimes gives rise to village gossip -- especially when it is known that he and his wife are not getting along well -- that he is carrying on love affairs with his younger sisters-in-law. 607 587

In-laws. A daughter-in-law is definitely subordinate to her mother-in-law. If they live in the same household, the mother-in-law is entitled to the best room and to be waited upon by her daughter-in-law. Significantly, the Burmese word for daughter-in-law (ကြံမ) means 'sweat woman. 606

The term for son-in-law (Ozme?) means 'desired son.' A son-in-law is a privileged member of his wife's family. His wishes are respected and his comforts looked after. His mother-in-law instructs her younger children to show him respect and deference.

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

She spoke so fast, so fast; the words fell over each other as they came from her lips, for her heart was very full.

I sat quite still and said nothing; I think she hardly noticed I was there. It was all about her husband. Everything was wrong; all had gone crooked in their lives, and she did not know what she could do. At first she could hardly tell what it was all about, but at last she explained. For some years, three or four years, matters had not been very smooth between them. They had quarrelled often, she said, about this thing and the other, little things mostly; and gradually the rift had widened till it became very broad indeed.

'Perhaps,' she said, 'if I had been able to have a child it would have been different.' But fate was unkind and no baby came, and her husband became more and more angry with her. 'And yet I did all for the best, thakin; I always tried to act for the best. My husband has sisters at Henzada, and they write to him now and then, and say, "Send ten rupees," or "send five rupees," or even twenty rupees. And I always say, "Send, send." Other wives would say, "No, we cannot afford it"; but I said always, "Send, send." I have always done for the best, always for the best.'

It was very pitiable to hear her opening her whole heart, such a sore troubled heart, like this. Her words were full of pathos; her uncomely face was not beautified by the sorrow in it. And at last her husband took a second wife.

'She is a girl from a village near; the thakin knows, Taungywa. He did not tell me, but I soon

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

heard of it; and although I thought my heart would break, I did not say anything. I told my husband, "Bring her here, let us live all together; it will be best so." I always did for the best, thakin. So he brought her, and she came to live with us a week ago. Ah, thakin, I did not know! She tramples on me. My head is under her feet. My husband does not care for me, only for her. And to-day, this evening, they went out together for a walk, and my husband took with him the concertina. As they went I could hear him play upon it, and they walked down through the trees, he playing and she leaning upon him. I heard the music.'

Then she began to cry bitterly, sobbing as if her heart would break. And the sunset died out of the sky, and the shadows took all the world and made it gray and dark. No one said anything, only the woman cried.

'Thakin,' she said at last, 'what am I to do? Tell me.'

Then my friend spoke.

'You can divorce him,' he said; 'you can go to the elders and get a divorce. Won't that be best?'

'But, thakin, you do not know. We are both Christians; we are married for ever. We were both at the mission-school in Rangoon, and we were married there, "for ever and for ever," so the padre said. We are not married according to Burmese customs, but according to your religion; we are husband and wife for ever.'

My friend said nothing. It seemed to him useless to speak to her of the High Court, five hundred

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

Yet this is the class from whom we most of us obtain our knowledge of Burmese life, whom we see most of, whose opinions we accept as reflecting the truth of Burmese thought. No wonder we are so often astray.

Amongst these, the taking of second, and even third, wives is not at all uncommon, and naturally divorce often follows. Among the great mass of the people it is very uncommon. I cannot give any figures. There are no records kept of marriage or of divorce. What the proportion is it is impossible to even guess. I have heard all sorts of estimates, none founded on more than imagination. I have even tried to find out in small villages what the number of divorces were in a year, and tried to estimate from this the percentage. I made it from 2 to 5 per cent. of the marriages. But I cannot offer these figures as correct for any large area. Probably they vary from place to place and from year to year. In the old time the queen was very strict upon the point. As she would allow no other wife to her king, so she would allow no taking of other wives, no abuse of divorce among her subjects. Whatever her influence may have been in other ways, here it was all for good. But the queen has gone, and there is no one left at all. No one but the hangers-on of whom I have spoken, examples not to be followed, but to be shunned.

But of this there is no manner of doubt, that this freedom of marriage and divorce leads to no license. There is no confusion between marriage or non-marriage, and even yet public opinion is a very great check upon divorce. It is not considered right to

21: Htin Aung E-5 (ca. 1930) 1937 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

536 only wife.[1] Yet Saw-may cries in the last scene, and closes the play on a note of pathos. The same scene appears also to be an attempt at sensational effect in showing the bedchamber of the two lovers on their nuptial night, but perhaps the fault is not more heinous and not less excusable than the bedroom and underclothes scenes of some modern plays and films in Europe and America. In spite of its faults, the scene must appeal to many because of the tender pathos and beautiful poetry it contains. In any case it delighted the audience of the day, and it seems even likely that the dramatist put in the scene against his own artistic sense to please the audience and the actors who admired so much the pathetic endings of *The History of Thaton* and the 'Baboon Play'.

The immense popularity of the play tempted the dramatist to write a second part to it.

As Saw-may is soon going to give birth to an heir, the rival queen in jealousy plots with the court astrologer to bring about her downfall. A son is soon born, and the astrologer, summoned by the king to foretell the destiny of the little prince, pronounces him to be a wizard and Saw-may a witch, although he realizes that the child is destined to be a great emperor. King Saw-phay, believing the astrologer, exiles both the mother and the son, and she leaves, singing sorrowful songs of farewell. Wandering into the forest, she meets her old friend the god, who sprinkles some water on the child, making him grow up at once into a youth of sixteen years. As he is a man born to be a great king, flames issue from his mouth and arms. He wants to know who his father is, but the mother and the god evade his question. He is seized by a desire to worship the banyan tree under which the Buddha attained Buddhahood, but as he cannot go to India, he prays that a replica of the tree should grow before him, and at once the desired replica appears. Overjoyed, the young prince again successfully prays for a wall of fire to appear round the replica, so that no one can go near it except himself. In the meantime the god has gone to the king and told him the truth regarding his son, scolding him for his cruel treatment of the senior queen. As the king doubts his words, the god asks him to go and see

[1] It is neither a crime nor a sin to marry two wives, but in the case of commoners, society frowns on it. Her husband's taking even a mistress is ground for divorce for a wife. But Burmese kings, mainly for state reasons, had more than one wife. This is the only Burmese play where the hero ends up by marrying two wives.

[587] [643]

25: Ferrars E-5 (ca. 1890) 1901 APl Burma
Burmese AP4

153. THE CHALLENGE (*see* p. 177).

the young wife's home, the lad working for her parents. As family comes and other daughters marry, the elder pairs are established in houses of their own. Married people are designated *ein-daung*—householders. Marriage makes no difference in the names and their prefixes. Everyone marries in Burma; the census of 1891 gave 1,306,722 husbands to 1,307,292 wives. The same census gave 102 females to 100 males of the Burman (so classed as Buddhist) population. (In Burma prostitution is confined to the large towns.)

A family of seven is considered large. The average number of house-occupants is 5·5. The cost of living of a Burman village household is 100 to 200 Rs. a year. In the towns the well-to-do spend 600 to 1000 Rs. and more; and at the present day keep a servant or two for the rough work, generally natives of India. Such accumulations of wealth as are made by individuals in India and other countries with a plutocracy and a proletariate are not paralleled among the Burmans. Nevertheless individuals amass tens of thousands of rupees, which for the most part they spend on works of religious merit. Monogamy is the received and almost universal practice in Burma. Second-wives are taken by a proportion of the officials and men of wealth. Hence it comes that the Burmans wonder more at the moderation of Europeans than at such license as they indulge. This license is not nearly so great as in India, but it is more open, corresponding to the higher status of the women of Burma, and thus it provokes more scandal in comparison. Unions of this sort among the Burmans are merely by mutual consent. A separate establishment in a different quarter of the town is maintained for the second wife or concubine (*maya-ngè*). Her children are under no disability, but she is not acknowledged by the first, and generally older, wife (*mayaji*), whose husband's love she is said to have stolen.

154. AN "ORIGINAL."